



Review of 'The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture'

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THE METAPOLIS DICTIONARY OF ADVANCED ARCHITECTURE

CITY, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY
IN THE INFORMATION AGE

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Morales

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Exactly 250 years ago this year, Samuel Johnson published his famous Dictionary of the English Language. An enormous undertaking that took nine years with six assistants. It left 'the Good Doctor' - as Boswell called him - oscillating between poverty and obsession, while he compiled his 80 notebooks of research.

Lovers of lexicography are indebted to Johnson's painstaking and idiosyncratic search for meaning amidst the changing world of the 18th Century. His approach: to trace a genealogy of usage through quotations, was held together with his characteristic wit and opinions. It was to be over one hundred years before anyone would attempt such a dictionary again.

The classic penguin dictionaries on architecture and building, have through numerous reprints and revised editions, safeguarded our access to the semi-arcanic terminology of architecture.

Few have tried to map the definitions, ideologies and endless jargon emanating from the world of contemporary architecture. While visions, manifestoes, and declarations continue to pack out the architecture bookshelves, any attempt at an A - Z has been offered only as an aside. The dictionary that runs throughout Rem Koolhaas's S,M,L,XL has triggered many similar and bizarre attempts at

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ACTAR

"The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture (MDAA) is an epic etymological project. It searches for words, meanings and definitions amidst our contemporary architectural maelstrom. Preferring a diversity of authors, voices and contributors it is a curious cultural panorama of our architectural words and ideas in the information age."

a related personal glossary. So too the dna like chains of 'isms' propagated by Charles Jencks, which simply provide ever more theories, rather than explain or define any of them.

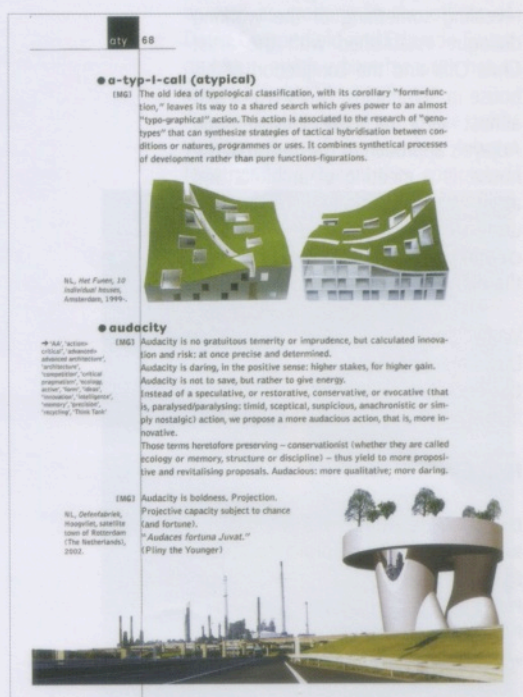
The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture (MDAA) is an epic etymological project. It searches for words, meanings and definitions amidst our contemporary architectural maelstrom. Preferring a diversity of authors, voices and contributors it is a curious cultural panorama of our architectural words and ideas in the information age. Published by ACTAR - the unique and unpredictable publishers based in Barcelona - it is a colourful and weighty volume to rival any reference dictionary on your shelf.

Starting out initially as the documentation of a conference of 50

architects who gathered in Barcelona to discuss and formulate ideas on strategic themes, it has grown from its first Spanish edition, into an International one - compiled and extended to explore many recent projects, terms and ideologies.

What is termed 'advanced architecture' is what the authors define as architecture shaped in the information age, "...one that creates, reinvents and uses... words in order to know where we are going... registering ideas at the speed of the culture of our time." Like Johnson's trawl through the medical textbooks, political tracts, theology and poetry of his time, MDAA compiles information from a wide and diverse multiplicity of sources.

We are even given Instructions: 'a protocol for use' that makes it clear ▶





► this dictionary is not an absolute, singular or complete vision, but as it says "...brings together a shared restless-mindedness." Words, language and ideas are constantly played with throughout the book - in both the actual words listed and in their definitions. Symbols in the margin provide a key that reveals the authors of each definition and a cross referencing system allows the sourcing of associated terms and meanings. "...we have not sought to classify...in closed categories, but rather to venture, like explorers into still fresh, emergent and untamed territories."

Amidst the words that we would expect in such a dictionary: 'e-city', 'folds', 'blobs', 'fractal', 'cloning', 'hybrid', 'chaos' and 'recycle' we are introduced to some new ones and unusual terminologies: 'chunking', 'blondels', 'dirty details', 'fresh conservatism' and 'swiss knife.' In this dictionary there is no revisiting the mantras of "form follows function" or "less is more" but we are asked instead to absorb words of wisdom from the movies: take John Travolta's advice and "What ever you do, do it cool baby."

There is no Mies, Corb or Kahn but instead their comic counterparts: Buster Keaton and the Marx brothers. They offer us alternative strategies of a distinctly non-linear approach. The strange and fragmented 'cut and paste' photoshop© world we inhabit, is rolled out into an intriguing alphabetical bundle of knowledge. The book zips through all kinds of possibilities for architecture. We are free to engage, assemble and

decipher the curiosities of our age that shapes our architectural lexicon. 'black holes', 'fuzzy logic', 'McGuffins', 'fourth worlds', and 'Gibson's spawl' are some of the terms we encounter across this pixelated, information filled network. It is full of projects, diagrams, photographs, musical scores and a lot more besides.

The metropolis of the past has become a 'metapolis': a multicity composed of information. Beyond this lies 'rurburbia' which supports colonies of 'home-workers' feeding the information economy. We are told "...our society has mutated into a society of entertainment...where entertainment means consuming."

This book is a wonderfully oblique view of architecture: a sort of distorting prism to look afresh at the operations and ideas of architecture. It is an ambitious and energetic attempt to search for meaning in our rapidly changing world. In the face of

our frenetic and constantly shifting 'information age', it can only ever be incomplete. But much like Johnson's dictionary, it savours the search. Its devious humour and rich multi-layered barrage of words and information is an open challenge to the way we think about architecture.

What Johnson would have made of it all we will never know? When questioned about the suitability of his qualifications for compiling his own dictionary he replied "...ignorance, pure ignorance." Perhaps this is a good starting point. When we search for culture we search to find our language. The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture will help us unravel something of our current architectural babble. ●

Paul Clarke

The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture

City, technology and society in the information age
By Manuel Gausa, Vincente Gualart, Willy Müller, Federico Soriana, Fernando Porras, Jose Carlos Morales
Coordinated by Susanna Cros Price: £45

